

The Construction of a Religious Minority: The Case of the Arians in the Iberian Peninsula (6th Century) — A Secondary Publication

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Abstract: Unlike other minorities examined in this volume, the Arian one constituted a dominant minority in the Peninsula until the conversion of Reccared. While considering the Arian creed as an ethnic command, traditional historiography did not explore too much the religious component of domination. As much as the sources allow, this article studies the religious dimension proposed by this way of ordering society on two converging levels, which are Arianism as a parameter of hierarchy and Arianism as theology.

Keywords: Minority; Visigothic society; Arianism; Clientelism; Power

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1. Introduction

When comparing the corpus of sources in studying Arian-Ostrogothic Arianism and analyzing Visigothic Arianism, the difference is so great that it can lead to absolute discouragement. The Ostrogothic corpus of Arian origin is some codices of the Bible of Ulfilas, a collection of sermons for liturgical sermons, fragments of a commentary of the Gospel of John elaborated by Theodore of Heraclea, companion of Ulfilas, and parts of a liturgical calendar ^[1]. This list is completed with the observations of his rivals in the interpretation of the faith, popes, civil servants, and so on. The truth is that being such a complex subject, capable of shedding valuable data on the political situation in Italy, ethnic statutes, and relations with the Empire, the information we have on Ostrogothic Arianism is meager and obliges us to empathize with Cohen in the complaint he formulates ^[2].

The situation regarding the Iberian Peninsula is, however, infinitely worse. To begin with, we do not have at the moment any document produced by Arians that deals specifically with matters of faith. We do not have any peninsular sacred or liturgical text, theological treatise, or pastoral formula, and even the observations made by the Niceno-Chalcedonians in polemical contexts are quite meager. Much has indeed been willingly thrown into the fire after the conversion, but it is also probable that no specific institutions have been set up for the creation or copying of religious texts ^[3].

There is also not much from the archaeological record. The floor plans of the churches show no major

differences from those of the rival creeds and no sign of any ornamental programs of their own, not even the Ostrogoths ^[4]. The baptismal fonts, which might emphasize steps or decorative motifs, are equally sparse ^[5]. It is clear that neither intellectual production nor material recording was particularly chosen by the Arian community in the peninsula to express the truths of their faith or to differentiate themselves from rival creeds.

2. Truth and power: Arianism, a religion of clientele

Since we only have scarce data and ample silences, we will have to reorganize our information to see what means were used by the Arian communities in the peninsula to transmit their religious truth during the 6th century.

A piece of news that Gregory of Tours gives us in his *Decem Libri* can serve as a starting point. It has many of the methodological problems that we have pointed out and others, that is it is the accounts from the opposition, therefore it has a clear polemical objective, and it also took place in the land of the Franks. In it, Gregory recounted his debate with a legate of King Leovigild named Oppila, who had come to Tours on a mission ^[6]. Determined to defuse any tension on religious grounds, the Arian had agreed to witness the Easter liturgy in the Nicene-Chalcedonian cathedral. However, Oppila found the Gloria formula that praised God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on an equal footing so indigestible that he ended up in a public debate with the bishop on an inferior footing ^[7].

This anecdote highlights several elements. Oppila was a lay personage, of the noblest of the nobility. His status as an aristocrat was fundamental for Gregory who reported the fact that the debate required a rival who, although not ordained, was of sufficient stature to measure himself against the bishop of Tours. For his part, except for his status, the Arian had no other elements to lend authority to his word, whether they were companions, settings, or material texts. Placed in hostile circumstances, he relied on the capital provided by his rank to do battle in theological matters.

Connected to his aristocratic status was also his degree of closeness to the Visigothic king. Oppila was certainly a member of the royal entourage, a trusted man of the Arian monarch. In the lands of the Frankish king, the power of his religious word was diminished by his background being a foreigner and layman; but, in the Visigothic domain and because of his closeness to the king, Oppila's message acquired the capacity to influence the course of some things. His aristocratic status and royal honors granted special authority to his word.

Although undoubtedly stylized by Gregory's pen, the information of what happened in Tours with all its mediations allows us to notice that in Visigothic Arianism, the aristocratic status had a remarkable weight when it came to generating belief and adhesion. The ornaments and delights of the written word by men could be added, but what concretely granted authority to the religious message was the quotation and the power of the sender. The weight of orality of the body present, authorized words, and signs of command made this message credible and in conformity with the revealed truth. This unavailability of the body and sovereignty of the enunciated with power bring Visigothic Arianism closer to the logic of the clientele, a mode of vertical grouping that organized loyalties, circulation of favors, and bonds of belonging around great personal powers ^[8].

3. Visigothic Arianism, an ethnic religion

It is well known that much of historiography has traditionally postulated a univocal link between Visigoth ethnicity and Arian religion. According to these scholars, religious adherence is mostly explained by birth ^[9]. At the other end of the historiographical arc, specialists such as Amory questioned this umbilical link, postulating the king as the great articulating agent of the Arian religious community in Italy ^[10].

Unlike the Italian case studied by Amory there is no known significant Arian tradition in the Iberian Peninsula before the fifth century, nor is there any record of heterogeneity of religious options in the royal family. All arguments that the American historian wields to support his thesis. This puts us in an awkward position to discard the traditional approach outright and embrace models that correspond to different situations. We are therefore obliged to reevaluate the link between Visigoth ethnicity and Arian religion with the few specific data we have.

The basic guide used by traditional historiography to link ethnicity and Arianism is onomastics. During the sixth century, not all Germanic names were associated with the Arian creed, but conversely, the known Arian faithful did bear Germanic onomastics ^[11]. Some of the names include Oppila, Agila, Segga, Sunna, Uldila, and so on ^[12-14]. Certainly, every time an Arian believer is mentioned, his name is Germanic, which strictly points to an association between creed and name, and not between creed and ethnicity ^[15]. Like marriage, we know that the name constitutes a family strategy that emphasizes a particular aspect of the group's past while discarding other possible ones, together with the creed, it favors and gives consistency to a policy of alliances ^[16]. Adhering to the Arian faith and placing Germanic names evidently responded to a calculated way of projecting networks of contact, as they are clear forms of self-definition of the family group.

From this, we can draw two obvious lessons. First, that family strategy, and not ethnicity, is indeed the first key to understanding adherence to the Arian creed ^[17]. The definition of faith and name added to personal status the possibility of concrete access to powerful supporters. Religious belonging was the result of a family appreciation, which in each branch and generation took a position for the group's past, and was projected with its present and future. Far from being a datum provided to the family baggage by the continuity of a linear origin, the religious adhesion constituted a factor to consider in the definition that each new domestic unit made of its profile, outline, and projection, cardinal elements at the time of assuring the reproduction of its conditions and status. This is not to say that the Visigothic lineage was invented out of thin air, but rather that from the tangle of crossbreeding and ancestry, the family placed all the emphasis on some lines over other possible ones.

The second issue that emerges from this is that the minority position of this creed constituted a sought-after strategy, a policy-oriented towards exclusivity and privilege. Namely, Prosapia, a faith of a few were ways of hierarchizing a type of authority and of clearly defining which group exercised it. This power of command was intended to be restricted to the handful of people who accredited such conditions, thus gaining social distance in an otherwise fluid and competitive elite. As we will try to show, Arianism in the Peninsula never had, even with Leovigild, a project of constituting itself into a Demas religion.

4. Arianism, aristocracy and clientele

Scholars are right in considering the Visigothic king as a key player in articulating the Arian community of faith ^[18]. But, as we have seen in the case of Oppila and in that of Agilat also cited by Gregory, the aristocracy plays an unavoidable role in this task, and its presence enhances the prestige of the group ^[19-20]. What concrete incentives moved them to renew their ties of fidelity to Arianism? What issues could facilitate adherence to a minority religion?

The most obvious motive has already been mentioned, which is loyalty to the creed facilitated access to powerful contacts, especially to the king, a source of distribution of favors and honors indispensable to mark the distance in a competitive elite. The Arians did not monopolize access to the monarch, as shown by the example of Claudius, Duke of Emerita during the rule of Leovigild ^[21]. Although the king reserved a margin of choice, his preference for co-religionists obeyed the need to retain loyalties while confirming the prestige of the king's faith.

Likewise, contact with the sources of power had an impact on minor groups and local populations. The lord increased his fame through the benefits he received through his religious adherence. The recognition of superiority would not necessarily demand conversion in this public as a counterpart, but rather set in motion an expanded set of services and obligations.

The Arian lords likely shared with the Niceno-Chalcedonians some power expedients that increased their ascendancy in the locality, such as the patronage of churches. It is known that the sacred building organized devotions controlled by the family or its agents, at the same time that it functioned as a center of social and territorial reference. Analyzing the large number of rural churches that were erected in the peninsula during the 6th century, Chavarría wonders if all of them should be considered Niceno-Chalcedonian, a gesture that would rule out in advance the possibility that they were of Arian origin ^[22].

In addition to common power systems, the Arian lords had a greater protagonism than the Nicene-Chalcedonians in religious matters, as demonstrated by the actions of Agila and Oppila already analyzed ^[23]. The arguments of the Arian legates in their debates with the bishop of Tours were probably calculated to confront the Nicene rival to indicate familiarity and good lay training in biblical culture. These abilities added prestige and signs of command in a heterogeneous and disparate public ^[24]. As we can see, Arianism generated conditions to strengthen the bonds of loyalty to the lord.

Up to this point, what we had observed was that the way of articulating community among the Arians, which is the demand for presences with status and power, the weight of orality, and the authorized word that resembled the clientelistic parameters, widely diffused in other spheres of society. What we notice at this point is that adherence to Arianism activated clientele, either as an expedient to aspire to other powers or as an instrument to accumulate it in intensity. Arianism was profoundly supportive of the clientele as a way of organizing society.

The novelty of the conversion introduced by Recaredo is that the King separated the Arian creed from access to the king, thus summoning the elites who until then had adhered to the traditional model to look for new solutions to guarantee themselves privileges. Apparently, a good proportion joined the king's innovations, retreating into a redefinition of ethnic origin and an intensification of contacts with the king, often through marriage alliances. Only a few, such as Sunna, Udila, Gosvintha, and others, remained with the creed, clinging to an order that had completely changed ^[25].

5. The king, the clergy, and the form of the community

As we have already seen, the king had a fundamental role in the articulation of the Arian community, as his elections gave prestige to the lords who benefited and their presence enhanced the community as a whole. Arianism emitted a political order that had the king as its apex ^[26].

We have also noted the affinity of the organization of the group with the clientele structure. The relationship of the king with the Arian lords militates in that sense. However, we know of the existence of a specific ecclesiastical hierarchy. Is the presence of the clergy, the register of offices, and honors instituted, compatible with the clientelistic form?

We know very little about the Arian clergy before the governments of Leovigild and Recaredo. We have no information about their modes of material survival, except for the indirect indication that in one case Leovigild had assured the sustenance of a Nicene elite by providing it with some servants ^[27]. We can suppose that this would have been one of the expedients used also for the Arian clergy. As we have already seen, the few names of priests that we know are Germanic.

In his important contribution on the subject, Mathisen points out that the sources only report the existence of presbyters until Leovigild, not of Arian bishops ^[28]. In the texts, the presence of bishops becomes evident just after the arrival of this king. Paradoxically, only the Council of conversion lists an ecclesiastical hierarchy similar to the Nicene-Chalcedonian ^[29]. According to Mathisen, these questions of nomenclature would be expressing an ecclesiology difference from that of its rival clergy, which is that only with Leovigild would the Arrian church have acquired a jurisdictional organization based on territory similar to that of its opponent.

We have no way of confirming the model proposed by the American historian. If we could do so, we would have made considerable progress in clarifying the link between the Arian clergy and the king. Like Mathisen, we can only work with weak indications on this important problem.

The first indication of the link between the clergy and the king is negative, in clear difference with the imperial case, throughout the period under study there is no sign of dissidence, questioning, or questioning of the clergy targeting the king's policy. Even the Recaredoningún conflict seems to confront the priests or a faction of them with the monarch. Had it existed, it would most likely have been recorded by his Nicene rivals.

The second indication is a strong concentration of Arian priests attending the service of the monarch, attested since the 5th century ^[30]. Even when Leovigild convened his council, as we shall see, he did so in the capital. This intimacy with the king, together with the support for his plans and policies, points to a clientelistic logic. The existence of specific positions would not refer to forms of organization outside the king or a lord. It would be a particular clientelistic relationship, which would be linked to other clientelistic chains whose vertex was the king, and which in turn would mobilize others. The Arian community would indeed be very heterogeneous and hierarchically organized, but religious leadership would be retained by the king and to a lesser extent, or on a local scale, by the lords.

From the Nicene-Chalcedonian councils, we know that the Visigothic king was actively involved in relations with the rival creed throughout the 6th century. By facilitating the organization of the meetings or by reducing collaboration, the monarch made himself an effective tool to interfere in the affairs of the major church ^[31]. Through his delegates in the field, he also established powerful alliances with bishops of the other creed ^[32].

The *Vitae Patrum* shows the king distributing religious buildings, disputing relics and charisms, stirring up conflicts, and mobilizing prelates ^[33-36].

Gregory and the Biclarense report on the council convoked by Leovigild in Toledo around the year 580 ^[37]. Both authors coincide in highlighting Leovigild's protagonism in the reform and connect the theological decisions of the synod with the royal will to broaden adherences to Arianism at the expense of the Nicene-Chalcedonians. In other words, the new formula recognized equality between the Father and the Son, but not with the Holy Spirit, and it also facilitated conversion by requiring only the laying of hands ^[38]. These initiatives of Leovigild have been seen as an attempt to impose Arianism as a universal religion in his dominions ^[39]. The sources, however, report the recourse to the liturgical formula to facilitate conversions and not a declaration of religious intolerance, a specific juridical mechanism for such policies. Neither do they report massive conversions among the parishioners, but rather the co-optation of influential members who would enhance the importance of the king's religion, thus lowering that of the opponent. As we can see, Leovigild's actions follow the logic of strengthening his faith community by adding status figures. His objective was to intensify the social position offered by the religious file, and not to inaugurate other ways of linking up with the elites.

In addition to mentioning the Arian ecclesiastical hierarchy in the same terms as the Niceno-Chalcedonian one, the Council III of Toledo offers firm data about the last Arianism. First of all, the council gives an account of a repertory of Arian churches scattered throughout the territory, which would have been served by a specialized clergy of varying rank ^[40]. It is unknown if all of them are clients of the king, but the rank of the

priestly personnel was indicative of this at the time. Many lower clergy may well have been direct members of aristocratic clientele. Secondly, different from the Ostrogothic experience, it was the King himself who at the council linked Visigoth ethnicity and the Arian creed ^[41–42]. This formula may pass for descriptive, but we should not lose sight of the fact that it constituted a statement of positions issued in a critical political scenario for the King and all those present. Through this statement, Recaredo presented before the Nicene audience the image of a closed and cohesive group around him, a human element to which the Nicenes were going to have access through royal mediation ^[43]. Before the new converts, the statement suggested that those privileges assured by the creed that they were about to lose could be regained through ethnicity, measured this time not by religion but basically by the onomastic and the network of alliances that connected them with the king. The deposition of the Arian creed entailed not only an obvious reordering of the elites but a redefinition of ethnicity. The point that in this new order of things would have ensured the continuity of the privileges would be the consistent permanence of loyalty to the King.

6. An Arianism of a few

Up to now, we have used the category “Arianism” in a formulaic way, to simplify our reasoning. But this nickname, circulated by the Niceno-Chalcedonians, reduces to a single theological position a range of very different interpretations, whose only common bond was the concern to maintain the irreducibility of the Father to the Son ^[44].

From the fourth to the sixth century, these theologies were adapted to very different historical contexts. The side that upheld the similarity of natures between Father and Son dictated for some years the fundamental lines of the ecclesiastical policy of the emperors Constantius II (337–361) and Valens (364–378) but did not even manage to prevail systematically throughout these governments. Already decreed the hegemony of the Nicene-Chalcedonian interpretation in the Empire in the year 384, the barbarian armies were given the freedom to adhere to the theology that defended the strict subordination of the Son to the Father. This situation of exception in the imperial context changed once again when the armies commanded by kings settled and organized stable systems of domination in the ancient provinces. Throughout these marked mutations, as we can observe, the only thing that remained firm was the intimate association of the Arian creed with the main sources of power of the day ^[45].

Some propositions of the Arian theology were especially suited to the project of domination of the Visigothic elite in the Peninsula based on religious dynamics. As we know, the fundamental theological line was upheld by the creed of Rimini (359) until Leovigild, which postulated the strict subordination of the Son. From Leovigild on, as we have seen, the subordination was located not in the Son but in the Holy Spirit. In both cases, the religious premise was the defense of a full divinity that appeals to agents of mediation to save men but is not confused with them. Those who did not understand divinity in such terms would have been disoriented, they would not have been able to dwell deeply into the revealed secrets. Only the few who could remain faithful to these traditional precepts would be truly saved.

As we can see, two key ideas of this theology could articulate well with the project of domination exercised by the Arian minority. On the one hand, and the most obvious, precisely the idea of a minority, of a handful of loyalists to the faith who did not need the consensus of the rest. On the other hand, the idea of tradition. Arianism was thought of as a creed respectful of the biblical letter and the faith of the ancestors. In this sense, it contributed to suture all the operations of family inscription that we have reviewed, which are strategy, calculation, and choice. The change and the permanent re-evaluation of the situation were ideologically

processed in contrary values, centered on the custody of the traditional faith and on the memory of the ancestors that had been privileged. Through Arian theology, in short, the idea of “ancestrality,” central to the project of this minority, was reinstated ^[46].

7. Conclusion

Unlike other minorities discussed in this volume, the Arian minority exercised a project of domination of society, which consisted precisely in regulating competition among the elites through royal mediation and religious creed.

Several elements explain the success of the model, which include its clientelistic language, its potential to generate prestige and new clientele, its capacity to make family balances viable, and its efficacy in providing key notions to exercise hegemony. Contrary to what was proposed by more traditional positions, ethnicity is a derivative of religious affiliation. Ethnic origin does not explain fidelity to a creed, rather, religious adherence, the result of a true work of family definition, ends up conferring ideological and practical consistency to ethnicity.

The conversion introduced by Recaredo disarmed the minority and its scheme of hierarchization of the elites by religious means. It was not so much a question of an erosion of the model promoted by social changes such as the proliferation of cross marriages, but rather a reordering of the pattern of domination of society as a whole and of the ways of regulating the competition of the elites. Recaredo took advantage of the increased religious tension generated by his father’s reforms and the political work led by a group of radicalized Nicene bishops, to propel a more centralized scheme. In this new scheme, which dispensed with formal, religious, or other criteria, the monarchy would obtain a greater role in the task of arbitrating and administering relations among the elites. The prerogatives previously granted by religious adherence would now have to be manifested in terms of ethnic belonging, defined by onomastics and parental alliances with the king of the day.

Disclosure statement

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